New York Theatre Critics' Reviews 1953

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Theatre Openings

"Kind Sir" "The Trip to Bountiful" "The Solid Gold Cadillac"

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NEW YORK JOURNAL-AMERICAN
NEW YORK DAILY NEWS
NEW YORK POST
NEW YORK MIRROR
NEW YORK WORLD TELEGRAM & THE SUN
NEW YORK HERALD TRIBUNE
NEW YORK TIMES

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"The Solid Gold Cadillac"

The New York Times
November 6, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since Josephine Hull can do no wrong, there are some charming moments in "The Solid Gold Cadillac," which opened at the Belasco last evening. Howard Teichmann and George S. Kaufman, collaborators, present her as a motherly stockholder who destroys the serenity of a corporation annual meeting by asking the officers some leading questions.

This is an ideal part for Mrs. Hull. Looking helpless and troubled in the presence of successful business men, she totters around the stage disarmingly, radiating sunshine and kindness and captivating the hearts of the audience. No actress has a face half as expressive as hers.

When she looks troubled she looks very troubled, indeed. When she looks hopeful, the whole world blossoms and brightens. Without ever trying to take command of a play, Mrs. Hull is practically invincible in the theatre, for everyone on both sides of the footlights surrenders to her when she appears on the stage.

She has several triumphant moments in this comedy, which the authors describe as a fairy story. With her sweet manners she is an endearing figure in the presence of unscrupulous tycoons. But perhaps her funniest scene is the one that catches her in the act of clearing out her desk in the office of the General Products Corporation after she has been fired. She has found one rubber shoe in a desk drawer, and she is hunting for its mate.

Humming a nice fireside tune, she keeps delving in one drawer after another, coming up with a coffee pot, a piggie bank and other incongruous articles—looking puzzled, astonished and worried by turns. But she never surrenders that serene power she has to be herself in any kind of situation, appealing simultaneously to the gallantry and the humor of the audience. Mrs. Hull is terrific.

The authors have very little else to contribute. "The Solid Gold Cadillac" is a graceless, random satire on the knavery of big business. It mentions a lot of funny ideas without developing them. Like Stephen Leacock's legendary horseman, it gallops off in all directions. Fred Allen has recorded his bland, querulous voice in a running commentary. Marc Connelly has contributed a burlesque declamation. There are some movie scenes shown on a screen as well as some parodies of television.

Mr. Teichmann and Mr. Kaufman have shaken their slapstick at just about everything in sight.

In addition to Mrs. Hull the cast includes Loring Smith who is an expert farceur. As the deposed head of a corporation and a besieged cabinet officer in Washington, Mr. Smith has a broad style that is funny. Like Mrs. Hull, he can introduce emotion into a scene when he wants to. The best scenes in the play are those that Mrs. Hull and he play together, for they are both troupers who know their business.

* * *

To convince the audience that "The Solid Gold Cadillac" is funny Mr. Kaufman keeps his actors shouting most of the time. Geoffrey Lumb, Wendell K. Phillips, Reynolds Evans and Henry Jones, the principal corporation rascals, talk at the top of their voices and grimace extravagantly. Edward Gilbert, scene designer, has gone through corporation and Washington life at a hop, skip and jump, supplying a lot of scenery that works mechanically.

Under the noise there is a vast emptiness except for the scenes in which Mrs. Hull quietly takes charge of the universe. Fortunately, she has a lot of scenes, and she introduces a lot of charm into the bedlam. A solid gold Cadillac is the sort of vehicle she deserves. "The Solid Gold Cadillac" isn't half good enough for such an actress and lady.

"THE SOLID GOLD CADILLAC"

Comedy by Howard Teichmann and George S. Kaufman; staged by Mr. Kaufman; settings by Edward Gilbert; presented by Max Gordon at the Belasco Theatre, November 5, 1953. The cast:

T. John Blessington.....Geoffrey Lumb
Alfred Metcalfe.....Wendell K. Phillips
Warren Gillie...Reynolds Evans
Clifford Snell.....Henry Jones
Mrs. Laura Partridge.....Josephine Hull
Miss Amelia Shotgraven.....Mary Welch
Mark Jenkins.....Jack Ruth
Miss L'Arriere.....Charlotte Van Lein
Edward L. McKeever.....Loring Smith
Miss Logan.....Vera Fuller Mellish
The A. P.....Carl Judd
The U. P.....Al McGranary
I. N. S.....Howard Adelman
A Woman.....Gloria Maitland
News Broadcasters
Bill Parker.....Henry Norell
Dwight Brookfield..Mark Allen
Estelle Evans.....Lorraine MacMartin

Journal American
November 6, 1953

Hilarious Comedy

Josephine Hull in Great Performance

By JOHN McCLAIN

GEORGE S. KAUFMAN who, in collaboration with Howard Teichman, wrote "The Solid Gold Cadillac" which Max Gordon presented at the Belasco Theatre last night, is still preoccupied with big business and the old vaudeville jokes about senators.

But thanks to the magic talents of Josephine Hull and an extraordinarily proficient production the old formula yields yet another hilarious evening for theatre-goers.

Here are the same corny characters and the slightly-modified versions of life behind the curtains in Washington and Wall Street.

There are interludes of newsreel film, reminiscent of "Of Thee I Sing," and overall the engaging twang of Fred Allen, as commentator; there is even a music hall bit written by Marc Connelly, and dragged in from left field, there are long lapses, and a plot as fleeting as a bartender's hello, but so help me, you'll have a good time.

Notable Role

For most of this the proprietors must thank Miss Hull for one of the most notable performances of her long career. This indestructible lady walks through the entire evening lending hilarity with the baleful roll of an eye, the nervous consideration of a single red overshoe, providing stature to lines which uttered with less understanding would die a-borning.

Few persons are so admirably equipped by nature for such a part; certainly none other makes such superb use of her equipment.

And as her inevitable foil there is Loring Smith, the lovable lamb in wolf's clothing. In one unguarded moment he is settling the affairs of the industrial world from a large office in the Pentagon, the next he is caught up in re-creating his role as a Roman gladiator from a play in his youth.

The circumstances which bring them together, in the Kaufman-Teichmann version, are slightly pedestrian. A small stockholder (Miss Hull) invades the stockholders' meeting of a large corporation and asks enough embarrassing questions to induce the directors to hire her as a sort of liaison officer for the other minority investors.

The former president of the firm has gone to Washington to accept an important official job and she is eventually sent down there to induce him to throw more business toward his old company.

Good Theatre

This leads to a government inquiry, the official is forced to resign, and in the end they both regain control of the corporation when it is discovered that she has corraled a staggering number of proxies from the small stockholders with whom she has been corresponding.

Mr. Kaufman, who also directed, is an old hand with these circumstances and, with the help of Max Gordon, has succeeded in surrounding the proceedings with a polished professional halo.

There is always a memorable curtain line; when interest lags there is the sound track with Mr. Allen's voice; the movie inserts are so good that somebody behind me whispered she wished she knew which theatre ran the whole picture, there are the efforts of Geoffrey Lumb, Wendell K. Phillips, Reynolds Evans, Henry Jones and Mary Welch in the supporting cast, but, above all there is Josephine Hull.

This is good, funny theatre—you'll laugh.

New York World-Telegram and The [illegible] Sun

November 6, 1953

'Cadillac' Has Solid Gold Hull

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

The audience bellowed hallelujah to Josephine Hull at the final curtain of "Solid Gold Cadillac" at the Belasco last night. It was an occasion of great rejoicing.

It has been too long since Mrs. Hull had a play worthy of her charm and unique comic gifts. Too long, too, since George Kaufman has delivered such a bright and caustic script as he and Howard Teichmann have now fashioned.

Except for "Teahouse," there is nothing new one half so funny. Like it, "Solid Gold Cadillac" is a howling hit.

Satire on Big Business.

This satire on big business is frankly related to the story of Cinderella, who in this case is Josephine Hull. As a minor share holder, she wanders into a meeting of General Products. When her stubborn curiosity upsets the big shots, they hire her to quiet other curious investors.

By the time the rascally officers are ready for further skullduggery, Mrs. Hull has written so many engaging letters that the boys are scared of her.

Off they send her to Washington where she retrieves their former president, now a dollar-a-year man. Between them they trump up a suit to foil the reigning cabal, but it fails. In the end it is Mrs. Hull's pen pals, forcing proxies on her, who save the day.

Swift Pace.

This is all related in spare, swift style, against simple sets that enhance the cartoonish nature of the play. It is languidly linked by a very funny offstage narrative voiced by Fred Allen. And when the story goes far afield, a movie screen imitates television for some happy fill-ins.

Josephine Hull has never been more delicious, than she is as the elderly actress, who applies age-old actor's alibis and reasoning to big business. On tiny feet, she drifts top heavily like a boat under too much sail, but ties up exactly where she meant to, every time.

Her eyes are as eloquent as her hands. You will love the wonderful sequence when she unloads her desk of accumulated treasures. And her placid acceptance of cussing melts her enemies down to size.

Loring Smith Is Perfect.

As her prince charming, the restored president, Loring Smith, is as perfect. He plays with broad, positive expressions, as nobody else in the theater quite can. His recitation, to prove he might have been an actor, is one to remember for good.

Four delightfully loathsome villains are played by Henry Jones, Geoffrey Lumb, Reynolds Evans and Wendell K. Phillips. Vera Fuller Mellish is madly comic as a silent secretary, and Mary Welch is most attractive as a romantic one.

Last night everybody was hysterical from having such a good time. They all felt it couldn't happen to a better gang, too, than Miss Hull, Mr. Kaufman, Max Gordon who produced it all, Mr. Smith and the rest.

DAILY NEWS

November 6, 1953

'The Solid Gold Cadillac' a Perfect Comedy Vehicle for Josephine Hull

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Some good old names came back into the theatre last evening, and for me it was like Troop C of the Seventh Cavalry galloping in at the last minute, routing the Redskins and lifting the siege of Fort Geronimo. I felt that I was back in show business again—and it felt oh, so good.

The names included Belasco, a nice old theatre full of memories and bright new furniture; Max Gordon, a nice old producer full of memories and bright new hopes; George S. Kaulfman, a nice old playwright and director full of memories and bright new jokes, and Josephine Hull, a nice old—

Well, Mrs. Hull, in your new position as vice president, treasurer and secretary of General Products, will you be a secretary for a moment and take a memo? Here it is: To Josephine Hull, Belasco Theatre, 115 West 44th St., New York. Dear Mrs. Hull: I love you. Respectfully, John Chapman.

Solid Fun.

The play at the Belasco Theatre, in which one of the women I love appears, is titled "The Solid Gold Cadillac." It has been produced by Max Gordon. Its authors are Howard Teichmann and George S. Kaufman. Its director is George S. Kaufman, and its cast is wonderful.

A long time ago there was a play called "Once in a Lifetime," by Moss Hart and Kaufman. Nobody knew who Moss Hart was, so everybody credited Kaufman with everything that was funny in it, until Kaufman set the record straight by saying that most of the play was this young fellow Hart's. For all I know, most of "The Solid Gold Cadillac" may be by another new fellow named Howard Teichmann, of whom I know little—but Teichmann got the right man when he found George S. as collaborator and director.

There is a lot of "Once in a Lifetime" and all the other Kaufman-and-Hart shows in "The Solid Gold Cadillac." There is also a lot in it of another classic of impudence, impishness and good humor, "Of Thee I Sing." And it is as bright and shiny and stylish and new as a Studebaker.

The play begins with the annual stockholders' meeting and election of officers of a colossal manufacturing empire called General Products. Some new officers (old ones being moved up a notch) must be elected because the president of the corporation has taken a big government post in Washington and has been forced to sell his stock at a profit of three million dollars.

Embarrassing Question.

The election is going smoothly and the meeting is about over when a timid little old lady who owns 10 shares (Mrs. Hull, of course) asks if she can ask a question. She has read every page of the annual report and she wants to know why the chairman of the board is being paid $170,000 a year and how many hours he works to earn this money. She is an actress, but she hasn't worked much since Vandamm made a nice picture of her in 1926. She puts one mild query after another, and pretty soon the new officers hush her up by giving her a phony job at $150 a week, being in charge of "stockholder relations."

The little old soul takes her job seriously and begins dictating personal letters to little old stockholders. She discovers that the company is in a bad way because ever since its former president took the government job there have been no more fat government contracts. She goes to Washington to see the ex-prexy about this. And, by the time the comedy is over, she and the ex-prexy have seized control of General Products and dear Josephine is riding around in a solid gold Cadillac driven by a solid gold chauffeur.

The plot shouldn't baffle anybody—but just in case it might the management has provided the soothing voice of Fred Allen, who explains between scenes that this is a Cinderella story. When things look darkest for our heroine, Allen comes on the air and assures the audience that if things don't come out right in the end the management will give the customers their money back. "Fat chance," he adds.

"The Solid Gold Cadillac" is crisper than a Bonanza Bill and has more crackle than a bowl of Wheaties. It manages to jeer good-naturedly at Big Business, Washington and TV. It has a wonderful long scene in pantomime in which Mrs. Hull cleans out her desk after she has been fired from General Products. And it has a top-hole cast which is sensitive to director Kaufman's genius for perfect timing.

The players include Loring Smith as a forceful business tycoon; Geoffrey Lumb, Wendell K. Phillips, Reynolds Evans and Henry Jones as an oily bunch of corporation slickers; Mary Welch as an attractive secretary and Charlotte Van Lein as a high-stacked advertising model.

New York Post

November 6, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Josephine Hull and Big Business

Everyone of sound mind, decent instincts and upright American principles loves Josephine Hull and cherishes her welfare. We are personally affronted when the theater serves her badly and find the world a brighter and finer place when it is treating her with the respect befitting her station. Because "The Solid Gold Cadillac" gives her the best role she has had since the classic "Arsenic and Old Lace," and throws in the unfailing Loring Smith and some very funny comedy as an added dividend, it deserves to be hailed with public enthusiasm.

The new play by Howard Teichmann and George S. Kaufman, which reopened the historic Belasco Theater last night, is a sort of free-wheeling amalgamation of social cartoon and mock Cinderella story. Although it starts as a fairly sardonic lampoon of contemporary big business and its current foray into Washington, and is at its best when it stays there, it hasn't any particular satirical viewpoint to maintain and soon gets back to the safer ground of the Cinderella legend. It isn't quite as funny thereafter, but it remains pretty comic, nevertheless.

General Products

It stays entertaining and almost steadily hilarious because Mrs. Hull is the ideal heroine for its purposes, and it is hard to imagine anyone more delightful. Just the idea of casting her for the part was inspirational. For her role is that of a seemingly befuddled old lady, an ex-actress who owns a bit of stock in the great industrial organization known as General Products and goes to a meeting of its pompous and questionable Board of Directors to ask some shy but embarrassing questions. The boys think they can silence her by giving her a job.

It seems that one of the big shots of the organization has taken a post in Washington and he isn't throwing it the orders the directors had been expecting. Since the big businessman turned statesman is Loring Smith, who prefers to recite "Spartacus to the Gladiators" to Mrs. Hull, the chances for first-rate political satire appear extremely good, but "The Solid Gold Cadillac" perhaps wisely changes its mind at this point. I think there is no doubt that it runs almost steadily down hill after that, but here Mr. Kaufman comes to the rescue as director.

Even Fred Allen

He, of course, is a master hand at staging good comic uproar, and he has remembered a trick or two from "Of Thee I Sing." He uses television newsreels and news broadcasts to carry on the story, and the voice of Fred Allen comes on from time to time to discuss the Cinderella angle. There is a comforting share of rich, resounding comic lines, and Mrs. Hull can be hilarious by merely packing up her collection of odds and ends in the office after she has been fired. It may get slightly pointless toward the end, but it remains good fun.

But what is important is that Mrs. Hull is always present to be lovable, touching, comic, wistful, sly, wise, befuddled and simply wonderful. And Mr. Smith is one of the original comic talents of the American theater. I can't think of higher praise to pay him than to say he and Mrs. Hull make a perfect team. There are also good performances by Geoffrey Lumb, Wendell Phillips, Reynolds Evans and Henry Jones as the directors and Mary Welch as a sympathetic secretary. "The Solid Gold Cadillac" is a triumph for Josephine Hull.

New York Herald Tribune

November 6, 1953

THEATER

'The Solid Gold Cadillac'

By WALTER F. KERR

Gold Leaf, Anyway

WE'RE told, quite early in the evening at the Belasco, that "The Solid Gold Cadillac" is a fairy-tale. It's a fairy-tale about a Cinderella who waddles (Josephine Hull), a Prince Charming who is having considerable difficulty with his setting-up exercises (Loring Smith), and Four Ugly Corporation Directors who would like to give both Cinderella and the Prince the heave-ho from the company in which they own stock.

This information is relayed to us by the voice of Fred Allen, story-teller extraordinary, and Mr. Allen is at great pains to keep the suspense rolling from blackout to blackout. At one point, when things are darkest for our loved ones, Mr. Allen assures us that the play will, after all, end happily. If it doesn't he adds, each member of the audience will be given a refund. There is, he adds further, a fine fat chance of that.

* * *

I don't think you're going to want a refund. But we'd better get the facts straight, right off. George S. Kaufman and Howard Teichmann haven't written what you're likely to call a play. It's more like a series of revue sketches, with most of the dancing left out. Call it a musical comedy without the music, if you like. You're bound to notice, too, that it ambles along without anything very probable on its mind, that the mythical plot twists are neither so inventive nor so funny as the casual asides, that there are wan moments right alongside some wonderful ones.

But—for this reviewer at least—"The Solid Gold Cadillac" has its own special delights.

* * *

Delight Number One is, of course, Miss Josephine Hull. The Kaufman-Teichmann combine has imagined Miss Hull as an ex-actress who prides herself on the fact that she once got a hundred-and-twenty-five per week out of the Theatre Guild ("Shakespeare is so tiring; you never get to sit down unless you're a King") and who is now in possession of a trivial block of stock in a corporation known as General Products. Having nothing else to do, Miss Hull attends one of those wrap-it-up-and-carry-it-away sessions for stockholders ("Would I be just awful if I asked a question?"). Miss Hull asks a good many questions—so many, in fact, that the organization is quickly inspired to hire the game old girl just to keep her quiet.

Thereafter events snowball, as people used to say when explaining old-fashioned farce. The jolly, and not exactly docile, hireling is soon involved in a trip to Washington, a newspaper-romance with a cabinet officer, and a backroom struggle for control of the corporation.

* * *

These episodes are generally written in the bare-bones manner of a rough cartoon. Miss Hull smiles sweetly, pops her alarming eyes, and illuminates them one by one. Whether she is dictating a note to her milkman, tilting royally in a director's chair (Miss Hull is built so that you can just about see her over an ordinary piece of furniture), or cleaning out precisely the sort of desk drawers you'd expect Josephine Hull to have, she is a solid-gold gift to the season.

Loring Smith is in fine fettle as well. As a Napoleon of industry, Mr. Smith tosses his profile around and recites Marc Connelly's windmill-version of "Spartacus to the Gladiators" with great aplomb.

Mary Welch takes care of the play's almost nonexistent love interest quite attractively, and Henry Jones, Reynold Evans, Wendell K. Phillips, and Geoffrey Lumb make up a splendidly fatuous Board of Directors.

* * *

Next to Miss Hull, though, the most interesting thing about "The Solid Gold Cadillac" is the sudden reappearance of satire on the Broadway stage. It must be a good many years now since anyone has devoted an entire evening to straight kidding; perhaps the last such samples were presented by Mr. Kaufman himself in the thirties. The author is, in fact, reworking some of his old gimmicks—notably the business of incorporating motion picture lampoons of the latest news broadcasts. But why shouldn't Mr. Kaufman borrow from himself? The thrusts are still juicily funny.

It would be misleading to suggest that "The Solid-Gold Cadillac" had the sturdiness, the structural hilarity, or the sting of the author's best-remembered parodies. But it's good for a hatful of chuckles.

Daily Mirror

November 6, 1953

'The Solid Gold Cadillac' Is a Solid Gold Click

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Though Christmas is still a little way off, Santa Claus anticipated the season last evening. He gave Max Gordon another big hit via "The Solid Gold Cadillac," provided riotously funny roles for the wonderful Josephine Hull and Loring Smith, and restored the Belasco Theatre to the legit column.

AS IF THAT weren't enough, he brought George S. Kaufman back to us as co-author and director. It is good to report that Kaufman, currently teamed with Howard Teichmann, has lost none of his knack for kidding the pants off the pompous. In this instance, they have some hilarious things to say about big business, government and the stage.

The beloved Miss Hull brings to life, with glowing and affectionate touch, an elderly actress, at liberty, as they say in the profession, and owner of ten shares of stock in the mammouth General Products Corporation. With time on her hands, she attends the annual stockholders' meeting, asks a few embarrassing questions and is promptly given a job to hush her up.

Before the kindly Miss Hull is through, she has upset Washington, made the front pages and done a lot for other little stockholders like herself. She has also etched a portrait that should go alongside Victor Moore's immortal Throttlebottom in "Of Thee I Sing." To give you an idea of her artistry, she had the audience howling as she silently emptied the drawers of a battered desk.

AS FOR SMITH, he is immensely amusing as a resourceful tycoon who decides to become a public servant. But, like an old fire-horse, when he smells smoke in his former business, rushes to get back into harness. He also finds time to remember a boyhood recitation with gestures, "Spartacus to the Gladiators," though it is a little overdone for our taste.

Salutes are also due Geoffrey Lumb, Wendell K. Phillips, Reynolds Evans, Henry Jones, Mary Welch, Jack Ruth and Charlotte Van Lein in other roles. Henry Norell, Mark Allen and Lorraine MacMartin contribute knowing performances as news broadcasters in film sequences. And a bow should go to Edward Gilbert's settings.

Fred Allen has recorded droll comments on the proceedings, to be heard during scene changes. When things look dark indeed for Miss Hull and Smith, it is the impish Allen who promises your money back if there isn't a happy ending—"and a fat chance there is of that," he adds.

AND HE IS SO RIGHT. The customers aren't going to be wanting their money back. They're going to be yelling for more tickets. For "The Solid Gold Cadillac" is a solid gold click. It's worth its weight in gold. A good-natured, though pointed, spoof, aimed at those who like to laugh, it hits its target with devastating impact.

For the gala event, the Messrs. Shubert have brightened up the historic Belasco. They have freshened the lounges, and bolstered the auditorium lighting to where you can read your program. This famous house is going to be a joyous place to spend an evening as long as Miss Hull, Smith and associates hold the stage there. And that should be a long, long time.

"Kind Sir"

New York Post

November 5, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

Conspicuous Waste in the Drama

In a way, I suppose "Kind Sir" symbolizes the current plight of the American theater. A talented and distinguished cast has been assembled for it. There is a handsome setting, and some lavish costumes for its leading actress. One of the ablest of contemporary directors has staged it affectionately. A particularly fancy audience of celebrities was even willing to stop acting in the lobby long enough to watch it. Everything that theatrical skill and popular interest could provide was present, and then there was no play forthcoming to go with it.

To be fairly specific about it, I should say that not since Ginger Rogers starred a few seasons ago in something known as "Love and Let Love" has so much concern with such externals of dramatic productions as scenic design, the fashion designer's art and the Hollywoodesque glamor of acting labored so earnestly and brought forth such minor results. For the comedy by Norman Krasna, which had its extremely gala premiere at the Alvin Theater last night, is a feeble antic worth no one's effort, including Mr. Krasna's.

No Divorce

It is the story of a "romance," if the word may be used fairly loosely, between a celebrated unmarried actress and a State Department economic expert, who says that his wife won't give him a divorce. Since he doesn't bring any notable wit in dialogue to bear on the situation, the dramatist is forced into all sorts of devices to keep the plot going. First, he shows that the financial wizard has a jealous streak, which provides one curtain. Then, he starts him on a mission to London. Finally, there is the whisper that the fellow isn't married at all.

There are even educational interludes. For example, a creel is mentioned, and some one asks what it is, and another tells her. It is all quite ingenious on the part of the author, if far from entertaining, but he declines to take advantage of one opportunity that is placed right in his lap. The dialogue, if it has few other virtues, is strewn with song cues, and Mary Martin is present to go on from there with the songs but there aren't any. And it is quite possible that "Kind Sir" might have been a nice intimate musical play.

The Stars

Miss Martin is, of course, gay, charming and immensely engaging as the actress in love, and, if she had decided to sing to us last night, everyone would have been very happy. Charles Boyer, as the economist, brings his enormously ingratiating stage presence and his exceptional talent as an actor to bear on his role, but it is a sight conducive of considerable melancholy to those upset by conspicuous waste in the drama to find the man who gave that memorable performance in "Don Juan in Hell" forced to fall back on his personal store of charm and humor.

"KIND SIR"

Comedy by Norman Krasna; staged and presented by Joshua Logan; associate producer and director, Marshall Jamison; settings and lighting by Jo Mielziner; costumes by Main Bocher; at the Alvin Theatre, November 4, 1953. The cast:

Anna Miller...Margalo Gilmore
Margaret Munson.....
Dorothy Stickney
Jane Kimball.....Mary Martin
Alfred Munson....Frank Conroy
Philip Clair.....Charles Boyer
Carl Miller.....Robert Ross

Even the lesser roles are filled by experts. There aren't more accomplished players extant than Dorothy Stickney, Margalo Gillmore, Frank Conroy and Robert Ross, but they are wasted in their minor parts. Everything that could be achieved in a far better cause is provided by Jo Mielziner's attractive setting, Joshua Logan's skillful and sympathetic direction, and, I gather from those who know better than I could pretend to, Main Bocher's dashing costumes for Miss Martin. It's a shame there wasn't also a play.

The New York Times

November 5, 1953

AT THE THEATRE

By BROOKS ATKINSON

Since every one is devoted to Mary Martin and Charles Boyer, it would be a pleasure to report that their play is equal to their quality. The play is Norman Krasna's "Kind Sir," which was put on at the Alvin last evening with all the luxury that Broadway can afford. Superbly cast and directed by Joshua Logan, with opulent settings, including a gold-plated piano, by Jo Mielziner, it is fashionable and trivial theatre that is spasmodically entertaining.

Having conquered the Western Hemisphere as a singing actress, Miss Martin is now dispensing with music. Let it be said at once that she is equally adorable this way. Her new look includes the candor, pride, charm and electricity with which we are all happily familiar. If she wants to act without singing, the Western Hemisphere is still her dish.

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Mr. Boyer has been acting without singing for some time. In case there was any doubt about it, he reminded New York last year in "Don Juan in Hell" that he is an extremely fine actor who can translate literature into theatrical excitement. He is no run-of-the-mine matinee ham. Show business always likes to put fine talents to trivial uses. There is something prodigal about using the best for the least of occasions—"playing against it" being the trade phrase. Putting Miss Martin and Mr. Boyer in "Kind Sir" is playing against it with a vengeance. They could act the whole thing with their hands tied and their feet encased in rubber boots.

Miss Martin plays the part of a spectacularly successful actress who is lonely in her heart—for one scene only. Mr. Boyer is a spectacularly brilliant banker who switches to the State Department when he has thoroughly conquered his own field. The actress falls desperately in love with the banker and he with her, although he warns her that he is married.

This little gimmick is Mr. Krasna's contribution to the gaiety of nations. For the banker is not married. He only pretends to be, to keep scads of women from committing suicide. Do you imagine that the actress finds out about his deception? Have you heard that hell hath no fury like a woman scorned? If so, you can write the rest of the romp, also with your hands tied behind your back.

Give everyone credit for having the courage of their convictions. King Solomon's mines were no richer than the production of "Kind Sir." Throwing caution to the winds, Mr. Mielziner has designed an incredibly luxurious New York apartment with grandeur of space and objects of art totaling a pretty sum before taxes. Main Bocher has designed costumes that were probably carted through the streets in armored trucks. Everything is smart, elegant, stunning and costly.

Nor has anyone stinted on the cast. Margalo Gillmore and Robert Ross play the modest parts of a maid and her husband with the intelligence they invariably bring to better parts in better plays. As a venerable State Department bureaucrat, Frank Conroy is as warmly sympathetic as he was in "On Borrowed Time" and "The Little Foxes." As the anxious sister of the glamorous actress, Dorothy Stickney plays with that cunning naiveté that has endeared her to audiences in everything from "Life With Father" to "Another Language." The principal parts of most plays are acted with less distinction than the secondary parts of "Kind Sir."

* * *

Miss Martin and Mr. Boyer have no trouble in outdazzling the parts Mr. Krasna has written for them. Her neat, shining personality, her mocking sense of humor and her lucid acting style are more than sufficient to the part she plays. And Mr. Boyer, an actor of magnetism, subtlety and taste, is worth ten of Mr. Krasna's men of exalted station.

Under Mr. Logan's sound and bountiful direction, "Kind Sir," is staged and acted with splendor. Every detail is carefully attended to. But what a waste of talent! Mr. Krasna's routine script is not worth the work and is not worthy of the people.

Journal American

November 5, 1953

Splendid Cast In Slow Comedy

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE are a few kind things to be said about "Kind Sir," the new Norman Krasna comedy which Joshua Logan presented at the Alvin Theatre last night: it is beautifully mounted, and both the stars, Mary Martin and Charles Boyer, are nice attractive people. But apart from that it is pretentious and dismal.

Maybe one expects too much from this high-scoring line-up, but that is the price of fame, and the fact remains that little amusement emerges from the evening.

It seems to me that Mr. Krasna has simply written a rather unfunny play and that neither the efforts of Miss Martin, Mr. Boyer nor the direction of Mr. Logan can lift it into the air.

From the rise of the curtain, publicized as costing $10,000 in itself, there is slight interest in either principal or their rather obvious destinies.

Elements There

Mr. Boyer is a dead cinch to get Miss Martin—a point bludgeoned home to the audience within the first few moments—but the manner in which it is achieved is neither particularly ingenious nor buoyed up on enough bright talk to justify the elapsed time.

This is the sort of embroidery which a Noel Coward might turn into a delightful and nonesensical farce, but Mr. Krasna isn't Mr. Coward this season.

The elements are all there. Miss Martin, a rather world-weary stage star is introduced to Mr. Boyer, a successful banker who has been induced to come to Washington and devote his services to the Sate Department.

They of course fall in love at once, and the only thing that holds up the final curtain is the fact that he insists he is married.

This tenuous thread keeps everything suspended through no end of jealous protestation on his part and elaborate retribution on hers. And naturally there is the delirious ending, in which her servant endeavors to impersonate a suitor, and thus brings the silly kids together.

Meagre as this sounds, it is still the stuff of which many successful comedies of the Lunt-Fontanne, Coward-Lawrence school have been fashioned. But in this instance the lines and the sense of the absurd are absent. There were times last night when one was at loss to know whether or not some vital point had been overlooked, maybe, after all, this was meant to be a problem play.

Miss Martin is blithe and engaging—she is congenitally thus—and Mr. Boyer is civilized and suave, but there was the feeling that despite the meagre material much more fun could have been developed from their relationship.

Mr. Boyer has a sincere approach toward love which, while one of his most popular qualities, may be one of his least comical, and Miss Martin suffers from a similar forthrightness. Maybe this is the point at which the director should enter the picture.

There are only four other characters in the play: Margalo Gillmore, Dorothy Stickney, Frank Conroy and Robert Ross, and I thought they were all splendid. Jo Mielziner designed a sumptuous single set of a New York penthouse living room and Mainbocher got up Miss Martin in a series of dreamy gowns.

"Kind Sir" is one of those truly regrettable experiences in the theatre—it should be so good, and it just isn't.

Daily Mirror

November 5, 1953

'Kind Sir' Slightly Naughty But Amiably Nice

By ROBERT COLEMAN

In "Kind Sir," Norman Krasna has fashioned a light comedy to display the romantic talents of Mary Martin and Charles Boyer. It is escapist entertainment which makes no pretensions to depth or stature. It is content to be a vehicle for two charming and immensely popular stars.

EVERYWHERE that Joshua Logan took "Kind Sir" to prep for last night's opening here at the Alvin Theatre, it played to Standing Room Only. Before the local premiere, most of the tickets for the New York engagement had already been sold. This will be limited to eight months because of the stars' previous commitments.

In his fluffy confection, Krasna has Miss Martin impersonating a stage luminary who falls in love with a successful diplomat and financier. The State Department glamor boy believes that marriage is a wonderful institution for others, but not for himself. He wants to have his cake and eat it, too.

So he pretends to be already wed to a wife who refuses to divorce him. But this masquerade is amusingly exploded in time for a happy ending, one that should delight the Martin-Boyer fans. And they are legion.

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TO SAY THAT Miss Martin impersonates a theatrical star is really begging a point, for she is a star to her fingertips in real life. Acting one at the Alvin is "just doin' what comes naturally," as she used to sing so blithely in "Annie Get Your Gun."

As for Boyer, we all learned that he is a polished and ingratiating player via his previous Broadway appearances in "Red Gloves" and "Don Juan in Hell" He is suave, likable and quite at home in the role of the handsome wolf.

Dorothy Stickney, who set a long-run record for our theatre in "Life With Father," again proves herself a most accomplished and winning actress as the star's match-making sister and knowing Washington hostess. Frank Conroy, Margalo Gillmore and Robert Ross do full justice to other assignments.

JO MIELZINER has designed a breathtakingly smart setting, and Main Bocher has contributed gorgeous gowns for the Misses Martin and Stickney. They offer a veritable fashion parade, one to enchant the feminine playgoers.

"Kind Sir" is aimed at those who want to see attractive characters in tasteful backgrounds and sophisticated situations. If you're looking for literature, this isn't it. If you're looking for a message, you won't find it here. But if you're willing to settle for a lively, amiable lark, make your reservations immediately. A few may be obtainable in the next day or two. But after that, wow!

If you've had any doubts about the ability of stars to earn money and create audiences for our Fabulous Invalid, "Kind Sir" should dispel them. It is no masterpiece of wit and invention, but it does offer a most pleasant evening with delightful and slightly naughty people.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

November 5, 1953

THEATER

'Kind Sir'

By WALTER F. KERR

THE stage at the Alvin is littered with talent. Mary Martin is present, and incontestably dazzling. Charles Boyer is present, prepared to be dazzled. Above the two stars towers a Jo Mielziner setting, daring the actors to outshine it. The costumes are by Main Bocher: yards and yards of breath-taking stuff. The stage direction is by Joshua Logan, past master of theatrical glitter.

I suppose it would take a bandwagon of a play to carry this resplendent company to glory. Author Norman Krasna has provided a kiddie-car.

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We are first introduced, as lamely as a lazy playwright could possibly introduce us, to a successful actress who is distressed about her not very active love-life. Shortly thereafter she is handed a retired banker who is being prevailed upon to enter the State Department in Washington. Actress and banker meet, smile, dine, kiss, discuss the fact that he is married and promptly enter into what may turn out to be the least titillating affair in the annals of the stage.

It is difficult to describe the precise quality of the desultory dalliance which takes up most of "Kind Sir," because "Kind Sir" is without any precise quality whatever. There aren't even enough half-hearted laughs to qualify it as a comedy (above-average sample: "He's single. He's a single bachelor!"). And as sentimental romance it is content to go on and on and on with this sort of smuggery:

• • •

"I wish we were on a desert island."

"We are on a desert island."

"Do you always say the right thing?"

Every once in awhile, too, the remarkably barren frolic takes on the perfectly straightfaced tones of an especially unsophisticated magazine serial, and Margalo Gillmore, as an actress' maid, finds herself spouting such homilies as "In this affair, she's not taking, she's giving," and "Those six months. At least she's had that."

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But no amount of example will quite convey the pallid and characterless quality of Mr. Krasna's empty escapade. If the lines are uniformly limp, the structure of the piece is monstrously shapeless, and each of its six curtains falls into an echoing void.

The actors seem perfectly aware of the void they are working in: Nearly every sentence is bravely uttered; but it is immediately followed by a strained and apprehensive silence, as though the show were being played on the brink of the Grand Canyon and the players had to wait for the echoes to stop before conversation could be resumed.

At that, the relaxed and almost reluctant technique being employed is probably preferable to any sort of pushing. It gives Miss Martin, for instance, time for random invention. When she hoists her eyeglasses to get a better squint at the man she's been waiting for, she is certainly fetching. She elaborates many a routine moment: pretending to an innocence that fools no one, unwrapping a gift with embarrassing haste, coolly putting Mr. Boyer in his place with a silky smirk. In her first non-singing role, Miss Martin is a resourceful and winning actress.

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Mr. Boyer's chore is not only thankless, it is graceless and humorless as well. The actor is forced to imply, among other things, that the deceptively demure lady of his dreams simply cannot keep her hands off him, and the gesture is almost too demanding for one of the finest actors of our time. Generally, Mr. Boyer is left to clasp his hands firmly in front of him, moisten his lips, and whisper huskily such nonsense as has been wished on him. His appearance here seems to me a downright tragic waste.

The unfailingly attractive Dorothy Stickney makes a little something of a moment in which she feels out a room to see if she can detect signs of male occupancy. Margalo Gillmore finds mild comedy in her suspicious inspection of some fishing equipment. Frank Conroy lifts his eyebrows and chuckles hopefully as he watches the progress of a catch-as-catch-can romance. And Robert Ross bounds about in a bathrobe, hides under a piano, and gives a little life to the sudden farce desperation of Act Three.

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The production is everywhere opulent, almost sybaritically so considering the poverty of the materials it dresses.

As I understand it, "Kind Sir" is—by virtue of its majestic roster of talents—virtually sold out through May. If you have bought tickets, you'll no doubt be content to look at the stars. If you haven't, congratulations.

DAILY NEWS

November 5, 1953

Mary Martin and Charles Boyer Give Needed Glitter to 'Kind Sir'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

A glittering audience and a glamorous cast foregathered at the Alvin Theatre last evening to perform the ritual of opening a comedy by Norman Krasna titled "Kind Sir." As an event it ranked, in its anticipation, its preparation and its uncertainty, with the launching of the Ark by Noah. As a play it is a modestly competent vehicle for two enormously charming stars, Charles Boyer and Mary Martin.

Upper Bracket Love.

If it runs—and it will, because people have spent something like $600,000 buying tickets already—"Kind Sir" may become noted less for its humor than for its inspiring an increase in the divorce rate.

The play is slightly immoral, being built on old French farce lines about people who start living in sin and turn square, but it is not likely to incite squabbles in the audience; it has a tough enough time stirring up a couple of minor fusses on the stage. The really troublesome and interesting part of the production is the five or six suits and gowns and things designed by Main Bocher for Miss Martin.

I can imagine now that many women will be going to see the play at the Alvin and afterward they will be saying to their husbands, "Daddy, why don't you buy me things like that?" And Daddy, trying desperately to protect his purse, will snarl, "What if I did? You couldn't wear 'em the way Mary Martin does." And—blooie! up goes the divorce rate all on account of a simple little comedy.

Generous Production.

Miss Martin, in the play, is a glamorous stage star who inhabits the handsomest living room ever designed by Jo Mielziner. She meets and, well, uh, takes up with Mr. Boyer, a naturalized Frenchman who is the best-looking and smoothest operator in our State Department. After about an act and a half out of wedlock the pair edge toward matrimony, and I suppose that the vast prepaid audiences will edge toward the Alvin's exits reasonably satisfied—satisfied, at least, until Mother asks Daddy why the hell he doesn't buy her something fit to wear.

Producer Joshua Logan, who also has directed, has given "Kind Sir" every benefit that an astute man of the theatre can bestow upon a comedy. His cast is the finest. Miss Martin, abandoning the musical field, is a charming and graceful comedienne; Boyer is an actor of enormous skill and presence, and nobody could ask for a better set of supporting players than Dorothy Stickney, Margalo Gillmore, Frank Conroy and Robert Ross.

Everything, indeed, has been all arranged for "Kind Sir" to be the greatest delight of the theatrical season. But Norman Krasna has not come up to the arrangements. His play should be gay and light and skimming and sophisticated, and it isn't.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 5, 1953

Heartbreaks and Laughs Pepper 'Kind Sir'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

Mary Martin, Charles Boyer and an excellent supporting cast are choosing to coast this season in "Kind Sir" at the Alvin.

This is a bit of indeterminate fluff which has some light laughs, the faintest fragrance of occasional heartbreak, and the chronic difficulty of being unable to make up its mind what kind of play it wants to be. This is comparatively unimportant since the entire run of the play is already nearly sold out.

It progresses through a series of situations where people either assume one pose, then contradict it, or tell a lie, then switch to the truth.

Lovelorn Actress.

The leading role, played by Miss Martin, is that of a successful but lovelorn actress, whose married sister is constantly trying to arrange romances for her.

Into the picture comes a charming Frenchman, in the person of Charles Boyer. He and the actress fall in love, with the understanding that he is married and can never be divorced.

He joins the State Department and is designated for an important mission in London. She plans to fool him and fly over ahead of his ship. He plans to fool her and stay in New York a few days, then fly. She finds he was never married, and naturally she feels a fool. The revenge she plots plays into his hands, and the implication at the final curtain is that they will marry.

This is a curious departure for Mary Martin, whose contagious joyfulness is by now world famous. As the actress she is forced constantly to be sorry for herself, except for a very brief passage toward the end. She does it all with great warmth and dewy tenderness. She also wears dozens of elaborate gowns.

The jokes all crackle around her, when they crackle at all, and the general effect is of a girl dreaming of better plays. Miss Martin cannot be boring, but she can seem enchantingly, nostalgically wasted.

Mr. Boyer is better off. As a cad with a code, he has two or three scenes where he expounds his lightweight ethics in high comedy style. He never presumes to rely on his charm, but like Miss Martin, he finds it impossible to come onstage without, in some ingratiating way, attracting your sympathetic attention. In this play, that is talent.

Dorothy Stickney plays Miss Martin's sister in a spicy style of her own, which brightens every scene she is in. Frank Conroy makes the most of his part as Miss Stickney's husband, unwillingly caught in the toils of love and war.

Flavorsome Parts.

Margalo Gilmore and Robert Ross have cannily accepted what might have seemed minor roles, and with shrewd acting made them seem the most flavorsome in the play. Miss Gilmore is as caustic as a retired actress, and Ross accounts for some welcome farce as a fictitious lover of Miss Martin.

These fine actors were lured to the play by Joshua Logan, who intended to produce and direct it, but became too ill to complete these chores.

This is a play of almost indescribable lightness. It needed great heart or blazoning wit. Lacking either, it falls in a vague middle ground of being too literal on account of social behavior to be either rich or tasteful theater.

"The Trip to Bountiful"

DAILY NEWS

November 4, 1953

Lillian Gish and Jo Van Fleet Give Fine Performances in 'Bountiful'

By JOHN CHAPMAN

Because of its unexpectedness it is surprising, and because of its excellence it is exciting to see sweet little Lillian Gish giving a big performance. But a big performance it is at Henry Miller's Theatre, where Miss Gish and an astonishing actress named Jo Van Fleet opened last evening in Horton Foote's playlet, "The Trip to Bountiful."

This piece is a sentimental sketch about an old lady who escapes from her son and daughter-in-law and flees to her girlhood home in Bountiful, Tex. Since the place is in Texas, you pronounce it Bayountiful because it is in the Sayowth and evvebody in the play is sutthin.

Author Foote is unabashed and unashamed as he pulls out the tremolo stops for his composition about a little old lady who can't stand it any more. Miss Gish, the sweet old thing, is set upon and nagged beyond endurance, she has a couple of heart attacks and when she gets back home to Bountiful after 20 years she finds the old homestead a rotted ruin. But, having had her little trip, she is happy once again, and is willing to return peaceably to the insupportable nagging of her daughter-in-law, Miss Van Fleet.

Good Theatre.

As well as being unabashed and unashamed, Author Foote is admirably skillful as he sets forth his play. He has a fine sense of humor, a true eye for character and a good ear for talk. In spite of its sentimentality and its tenuous story, "The Trip to Bountiful" is good theatre.

The two main actresses in it make the play good theatre. Miss Gish, who flirted with playing an old lady a few seasons ago in "The Curious Savage," really goes at the job this time with all the will and skill of a really good player. In voice, in accent and in makeup she is a pathetic little soul who lives under the domination of a hellion daughter-in-law and yearns for escape to the old homestead.

Artful Characterization.

Opposing her as the daughter-in-law is Miss Van Fleet, and this is the saltiest, funniest and most artful feminine characterization of the season. Miss Van Fleet is a shrill, nervous, cruel and empty-headed woman who has a mouse for a husband and another mouse for a mother-in-law, and she resents them both. Last night's first audience cheered both ladies before the play was over — something that doesn't happen much any more.

"THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL"

Play by Horton Foote; staged by Vincent J. Donehue; settings by Otis Riggs; costumes by Rose Bogdanoff; lighting by Peggy Clark; presented by the Theatre Guild and Fred Coe at Henry Miller's Theatre, November 3, 1953. The cast:

Mrs. Carrie Watts..Lillian Gish
Ludie Watts.....Gene Lyons
Jessie Mae Watts..Jo Van Fleet
Thelma.....Eva Marie Saint
Houston Ticket Man...Will Hare
A Traveler.....Salem Ludwig
2nd Houston Ticket Man.....David Clive
Harrison Ticket Man.....Frederic Downs
Sheriff.....Frank Overton
Travelers..Patricia MacDonald, Neil Laurence, Helen Cordes

There are some other nice performances under the good direction of Vincent J. Donohue, including that of Gene Lyons in the thankless role of Miss Gish's spineless son and a warm and sympathetic one by Eva Marie Saint as a girl who befriends the old lady. Otis Riggs' settings, which include a drab Houston apartment, a couple of bus stations, a section of a bus and the beautiful ruin of an old Texas farm, are top-grade.

Journal American

November 4, 1953

Fine Acting—Little Play

Lillian Gish Fails to Save Scant Story

By JOHN McCLAIN

THERE are two stand-out performances in "The Trip to Bountiful," the new Theatre Guild-Fred Coe production which arrived at Henry Miller's Theatre last night, but they are not enough to save a meagre and faltering story.

Lillian Gish, the star, and Jo Van Fleet, an incisive character actress, nearly knock themselves out for the cause, but when the smoke has cleared away it appears they have won a hollow victory. Nobody seems to care.

Horton Foote's story deals with almost the least attractive household the season has yet to offer: an oppressed mother living in two rooms with a weakling son and his nagging and irascible wife.

The old lady's one wish is to return to the peace and dignity of her childhood home in Bountiful (Tex.), the daughter-in-law wants mostly to pay regular visits to the hair-dresser and the corner drug store, and the son, a filmy character at best, appears to be concerned principally with keeping this dreary home together.

Early in the proceedings it becomes evident that something fairly spectacular will have to happen to sustain any lasting interest in this gruesome trio.

The daughter-in-law complains constantly and yaps at her mother-in-law, the son maintains a stoic and stupid bewilderment, and the mother either rocks furiously in a chair or flies around the apartment at a dog-trot, re-echoing her desire to return to Bountiful.

This suggests to the average client that the third act will bring the Marines, or a reasonable facsimile, restoring to the old lady the nobility she craves, and at the same time promising some possible future for her son and his wife.

But when we last see them the mother has made her trip to Bountiful, the son and daughter-in-law have come to take her back to the apartment—and I, for one, had no reason to believe that life there would be any less hideous than before.

I am not of the opinion that because Mums gets a quick gander at the old homestead her son will suddenly become an industrial giant or that his wife will mend either her ways or her shattering accent.

Skilled Acting

Forgetting what will happen to them for the moment, it must be agreed that Lillian Gish turned in a skilled and sympathetic performance as the mother, and at great odds.

For most of the first act she is required to rock relentlessly in a chair and to repeat her chant about going to Bountiful until several members of the audience suggested taking up a collection.

But her role assumes realistic proportions in the second and third acts and she comes very close to bringing the play back to depth and importance. It is no fault of hers that the conclusion is unfulfilled.

Jo Van Fleet, as the daughter-in-law, gives one of the great interpretations of the season in the least sympathetic part; one comes away hating her to the point of adoration.

Gene Lyons did his level best with the son, a thankless effort, and Eva Marie Saint came off with honor as the young wife who befriends Miss Gish on the bus trip.

I thought Otis Riggs did a creditable job with the complicated sets and Vincent Donehue's direction was resourceful.

But I'm not sure "The Trip to Bountiful" is worth a trip to the Henry Miller.

New York Post

November 4, 1953

By Richard Watts Jr.

The Drama of a Wistful Escape

It is easy to see why television audiences were moved and impressed by Horton Foote's "The Trip to Bountiful" when they saw it in its pre-theater incarnation. For its story is simple, touching and honest in its sentimental appeal, and it provides a leading role for Lillian Gish that is ideal for this fine and sensitive actress.

Transferred to the stage, Mr. Foote's play has apparently had to be expanded considerably, and it now seems extremely attenuated and far from robust dramatically, but it still has an emotional integrity that has to be respected.

At Henry Miller's Theater, where it opened last night, "The Trip to Bountiful" has the advantage of some excellent settings by Otis Riggs and several performances of striking effectiveness. Miss Gish gives a deeply moving portrayal of a trapped old lady, persecuted by her shallow, garrulous daughter-in-law and seeking refuge in flight back to the community in which she had spent her happier days. In addition, there is a lovely performance by an attractive young actress from television named Eva Marie Saint, and there are honest characterizations by Gene Lyons and Jo Van Fleet.

Honest Virtues

If "The Trip to Bountiful," despite its slimness and occasional lethargy, is a play that holds the respect due to honesty, it is in large part the result of things that it refuses to do. Poor old Mrs. Watts, who flees from the home of her weakling son and his nagging wife, doesn't have a great victory over her persecutor. There is no big theatrical scene in which she turns on her formentor. The weakling son makes no rebellion of his own, and the dilapidated town of Bountiful doesn't turn out to be a triumphant haven for the oppressed.

In the end, the old lady goes back meekly enough to the domination of the woman she loathes, and there are no illusions left her that her son is finally going to stand up for his rights. And the nice girl, who had tried to help her, disappears undramatically from her life. But the final scene is not altogether defeatist. Mrs. Watts at least does have her last look at what is now a ghost town and gains from her memories strength to face the melancholy final years of her life. Mr. Foote has written a quiet play that ends on a quiet note.

Helpful Details

The virtues of his drama are modest but not easily to be forgotten. In the first act the sense of a lost, friendless old woman hopelessly trapped is captured hauntingly. The quiet talk on the bus between the fleeing mother and the girl who befriends her is touchingly done. The portrait of the horrible wife is managed with utter credibility. And such a minor character as a sheriff, who sympathizes with the lonely wanderer, comes to complete, if momentary, life. These details are so good that it seems a shame the resulting play is quite so attenuated.

It is Miss Gish who dominates the play, and her characterization is not only moving but beautifully detailed. But Miss Saint, as the friendly girl, provided a touching and sensitively lovely performance that is of enormous help to the evening, and Gene Lyons as the well-meaning weakling of a son, Jo Van Fleet as the unpleasant but slightly comic daughter-in-law, and, in a small role, Frank Overton as the sheriff are notably good. "The Trip to Bountiful" is neither dramatically stirring or fully realized, but its simple honesty is quietly touching.

New York World-Telegram and The Sun

November 4, 1953

Tense Moments Fill 'Bountiful'

By WILLIAM HAWKINS.

"The Trip to Bountiful" at the Henry Miller is that rarest of theater experiences, an evening which will prove an indelible memory.

Through the consumate artistry of Lillian Gish, this sensitive, intensely personal play becomes an emotional chase which has the suspense and tense excitement of the wildest physical contest.

It is quite simply an account of an elderly woman's gallant escapade, when she runs off alone to see, just once more, the house where she grew up.

Taut Unrest.

The instant the first curtain goes up, the taut unrest of the drama is conveyed by Miss Gish as she rocks violently and silently in her chair, watching the night out her window. Her son is a good, kind, harassed young man, married to a girl whose childless life is as empty as her head.

It is now 20 years since the mother sold her old country home. For 15 she has been the interloper on this dull city marriage, welcomed only for her pension check.

Nerves are frazzled in the heat, and the next morning the mother craftily makes her way to Bountiful, succeeding with the help of a few kind, understanding people met on the way.

Miss Gish has long been classed as one of our finest actresses, but her performance here suggests that her capacity may too often be taken for granted. The penetrating sensitivity of her acting is a constant revelation. She has always been a genius in pantomime, and one of this play's exhilarating virtues is the quantity of moments when she clarifies an emotion, a relationship, or sometimes a whole life, without saying a word.

As the superficial daughter-in-law, mindful only of cokes and fan magazines, Jo Van Fleet gives a bold and sensitive performance, as right and important to the play as one leg of a tripod.

Gene Lyons is the son, a less varied role but one which he plays with a steady sense of strained patience and controlled irritation.

Shattering Moment.

Eva Marie Saint is lovely and composed as the traveling companion to the mother. Miss Gish reciting to her the 91st Psalm is a most deeply shattering moment. Frank Overton adds burly gentleness as the Sheriff who at last lets the old lady get home.

Horton Foote has done, and done beautifully, the one thing it is important for a playwright to do. That is, provide the disciplined material for expert actors to completely capture an audience and hold it through the evening.

Daily Mirror

November 4, 1953

'The Trip to Bountiful' At The Henry Miller

By ROBERT COLEMAN

Over the years Horton Foote has dedicated himself to the depiction of the minor joys and tragedies of small-town people. Particularly those in his home state of Texas. In "The Trip to Bountiful," which the Theatre Guild and Fred Coe brought to Henry Miller's Theatre last evening, he is writing about them again.

THIS TIME he is interested in the Watts family. Twenty years before the curtain's rise, Mrs. Carrie Watts had sold the farm land surrounding her home to educate her son, Ludie. Currently, Ludie is living with his wife of 15 years and his bewildered mother in a drab Houston flat, trying to eke out a living.

Jessie Mae Watts is a vulgar, shallow, selfish woman. All she appears to think about is her own comfort, beauty parlors and the movies. The city is in her blood. The elder Mrs. Watts not only contributes her pension check to the upkeep of the family, but waits hand and foot on her well-intentioned son and exasperating daughter-in-law. She even addresses the younger woman as "Ma'am."

In desperation, Carrie Watts finally escapes from under Jessie Mae's watchful eye and makes a hectic bus trip back to her dilapidated old home in Bountiful. There she finds in nature—the birds, the overgrown fields, the unconquerable gulf—a measure of peace and human dignity that will sustain her for the rest of her brief life back in Houston.

"THE TRIP TO BOUNTIFUL" is essentially a mood play, with the contrasting philosophies of city and rural life expounded primarily in what amount to mohologues. These monologues are read magnificently by Lillian Gish, as the elder Mrs. Watts, and Jo Van Fleet, as the younger, with occasional and helpful interruptions by other characters.

Miss Van Fleet, brassy, empty-headed and terrifyingly talkative, dominates the first act. Her performance is an amazing tour de force, a trifle reminiscent of Louis Bartels' Aubrey Piper in "The Show-Off." Like Bartels, she grates on your nerves with her cackling laughs until you want to throttle her. But Jessie Mae isn't at all likable, and Aubrey was.

Miss Gish is triumphant during the second and third acts, as she tells newly-met acquaintances of her troubles and hopes, comforts a lonely young war bride and finds new strength through the mere trickle of Bountiful's earth through her hands. It is a deeply moving, honest performance, one of her all-time best.

GENE LYONS is excellent as the kindly son who seeks to keep peace between his mother and wife. Eva Marie Saint has a touching sequence as the girl separated from her husband in Korea. She has a sensitive quality that should carry her far. Frederic Downs and Frank Overton are outstanding as a bus ticket agent and sheriff who carry out their duties in a decent way.

Vincent J. Donehue has directed "The Trip to Bountiful" with evocative skill, and Otis Riggs has designed admirable settings.

We found "The Trip to Bountiful" mostly depressing and, in spots, harrowing. When we go to the theatre, we want to be taken out of ourselves, transported into a life bigger, more stimulating than ours. You can find people everywhere like those Foote has etched without paying $4.80 to see them. While we sympathize with them, they do not make for a rewarding evening in the theatre.

NEW YORK **Herald Tribune**

November 4, 1953

'The Trip to Bountiful'

By WALTER F. KERR

LILLIAN GISH does enormously endearing things with "The Trip to Bountiful." The new Horton Foote play which opened at the Henry Miller Tuesday casts its gentle and genuinely affecting star in the role of an elderly widow who has had quite enough of life with a weakling son and a fire-eating daughter-in-law.

When we first see Miss Gish she is chained to a rocking-chair in a moonlit city apartment, listening restlessly to the traffic snarl below. Miss Gish rocks magnificently, as though with a little more push the chair could be made to drive her right back to her childhood home in Bountiful, Texas.

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With the dawn, she is scurrying about the place like an underpaid rabbit, toting the family dishes, dropping to her knees to check her daughter-in-law's hemline, trying desperately to please a generation that doesn't want her and at the same time preserve one tiny shred of dignity.

Mr. Foote gives her a crack at escape. And once Miss Gish has eluded her demanding "family" and settled herself breathlessly on a cross-country bus, she casts a blissfully peaceful spell over the theater. As she chats with a quiet girl who has befriended her, cheers her up with the Ninety-First Psalm—the actress has an admirably down-to-earth manner of dealing with a passage that would normally be stickily read—and takes to wondering whether she was ever kind enough to the husband she didn't love, she is an honest, admirable and touching figure.

Later, too, she is moving, perhaps most moving when she is sitting silently on the shattered homestead in Bountiful, listening to her son puzzle out the whys and wherefors of his empty life.

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In putting this fragile portrait into some sort of dramatic perspective, Miss Gish is chillingly abetted by Jo Van Fleet. Miss Van Fleet is the household scourge from whom mother is flying: a faded Cinderella with the manners and vocal equipment of a coyote. Mr. Foote has written the part with blistering accuracy; he has not, however, quite elevated it to the level of artistry, and you may feel a strong urge to climb the Miller footlights and deal with this scorpion personally.

Miss Van Fleet keeps it this side of caricature, though. As she competes with a shrill radio in a high-pitched voice that only dogs should be able to hear, as she turns agonizingly tony when called upon to read the title of a 'literary' work, she is blood-curdling and just about credible.

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Director Vincent Donohue has drawn other interesting performances from an excellent cast. Eva Marie Saint, for instance, is a model of restraint in the part of Miss Gish's warm-hearted fellow-traveler. Miss Saint just nudges the role into existence, working softly, placidly and with infinite attractiveness. Gene Lyon sets his mouth in a grim line as the henpecked son—Horton Foote has surely underwritten his man—and makes an ineffectual character a mildly appealing one.

The Theater Guild and Fred Coe have given Mr. Foote's lonesome journey to the past a handsome production, and designer Otis Riggs has kept a complex series of settings pleasantly fluid.

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The play itself? "Trip to Bountiful" has had almost as devious a jaunt to Broadway as its heroine does to Bountiful. Originally written as a full-length acting piece, it was condensed for television performance. Successful there, it has once more been expanded to legitimate proportions.

It remains a small play, attractive enough in its account of the journey proper, tenuous and repetitive in its opening and closing acts. It takes Mr. Foote about three minutes to establish his tortured family relations; at the Miller, he is compelled to stretch them to thirty. Once his little old lady has arrived at her destination, there is nothing for her to do but go back; and the trail is quite a long time turning.

Still more serious, it seems to me, is the absence of that trace of poetry which would give body, and lyric distinction, to so simple a tale. The author has made heartening strides since his last play, "The Chase," but he still is content with a platitude where more vigorous insight, and more penetrating language are called for.

The play is lacking in sustained vitality. But Miss Gish and associates do it proud.